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ABSTRACT

This description of the difficulties of school library and community information services in a developing country includes forceful images of a rural indigenous people with little self-known history, and widely separated by a wild and rough terrain and diverging cultures--all of which conspire as obstacles to the spread of library and school services even at the primary school level. Although large in number, primary schools suffer from inefficient teachers of writing and language (especially hampered by the use of a foreign language as a teaching medium), second rate teachers, and lack of educational materials; in addition, the schools as vital centers of community education are totally neglected. To remedy this, it is the desire of the government that these 'community' schools assist children in achieving a deeper awareness of themselves as members of their community, a reality only if: (1) they become more efficient in teaching literacy to children, (2) they provide the means of teaching literacy to adults, and (3) they provide a community service as information resource centers. (Author/RAA)

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EXTENDING SCHOOL LIBRARY AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES TO A SCATTERED POPULATION: PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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EXTENDING SCHOOL LIBRARY AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES TO A SCATTERED POPULATION: PAPUA NEW GUINEA

1. Introduction

The main island of Papua New Guinea, together with the Indonesian Territory of West Irian, is the biggest in the world after Greenland; Papua New Guinea occupies the Eastern half of that island along with a multitude of smaller islands, some of them as big as Great Britain, while others are tiny coral atolls.

Papua New Guinea celebrated independence from Australia in 1975. It lies between the equator and Australia. It is a tropical country with a tropical climate. Like other tropical countries, it has only two seasons, the wet and the dry. Temperature varies from place to place: the highland areas are cool while the coastal areas experience a uniform climate with high temperatures. The population is estimated to be 3 million.

To those wishing to promote an active viable library service, Papua New Guinea presents many problems similar to those of many other developing countries. But just as many unique problems occur which will continue to hamper any large scale library extension project. The topic of this paper cannot be practically applied to Papua New Guinea because of the lack of an active school library service. This paper will therefore concentrate on the problems that will affect this future project and suggest possible solutions to some of them.

I wish to begin by giving a brief summary of my early school experience. By doing so, I hope to draw your attention to the poverty of the primary schools. I think the primary school is the ideal setting for this project because they are found right across the country.

My school and work experience

I was taught to read and write in my mother tongue. It was at a village mission school and the teacher was the village pastor. He trained six senior boys to assist him. There was a beautifully illustrated reading primer in the vernacular depicting everyday village activities. It was a favourite reading material for everybody. It was so popular that even today village people can often recite passages from it. This of course illustrates that reading can be fun and more meaningful if the material relates to village or local experiences and is written in a language that people canspeak and understand.

The primary school to which I then progressed was a strange experience. Instruction was by Australians in a foreign medium (English). Several village elders were selected to make sure that all school children must at all times converse in English. Anyone caught speaking in the vernacular with other school children was punished.

There was a series called Minenda which was used for reading classes. These were in English, illustrated with local scenes and names of children that are common in Papua New Guinea. They did prove very popular but as I progresses to grade 6 (the end of primary schooling) a book similar to that used in junior schools in Australia containing stories of "Merchants of Bagdad", "City of London and Big Ben" was given to me to read. Being totally unfamiliar with the background of these stories, it proved difficult. There was and still is no library in this school. So the children still experience difficulties in getting appropriate reading materials.

My first teaching post took me to one of the most interesting areas in the country - interesting because the village hamlets and the people were still untouched by modernisation and many modern institutions were in the same valley. The valley was about 5,000 feet above sea level in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It was here that I first learnt of the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (S.I.L.). S.I.L. is a modern township and employs volunteers of all nationalities to study and write down the languages of Papua New Guinea. Their main task is to translate the Bible in the languages they study. They carry out the only literacy programme in the country and produce reading and writing materials for numerous communities. As well as that, they train selected village people to learn simple appropriate village technologies like carpentry, home economics, writing simple village stories, etc. These people later go back to their villages and teach others of their new skills. The S.I.L. members visit the villages every now and then and help them in their difficulties. This institution has its own International High School.

Next door to S.I.L. was the Aiyura National High School. This school is one of the four national high schools in the country, Students for these schools are best of the form four graduates of provincial high schools. After two years at national high schools, most of them go onto tertiary studies.

Almost joining this school was the Aiyura Agricultural Experimental Station. This little station had the International Primary School. It was attended mainly by children of all expatriates living in Kainantu township and Aiyura valley.

Perched on a small hill-slope, surrounded by all these modern institutions was one of the many primary schools of Kainantu area. This school was built out of local bush materials (thatched roof type) and the children came from nearby hamlets, while some of them walked several miles each morning to get to it.

As a result of passing through high school and tertiary level education and later working as a teacher and now a librarian, I now feel that the information needs of the rural and urban communities are completely neglected. The few public libraries in the main towns only attract the few well educated Papua New Guineans but the majority of the clients are expatriates. So our libraries are a waste of resources to the village communities and many urban workers.

THE PROBLEMS

Geography

From its earliest history, communication in Papua New Guinea has proven difficult. In ancestral times, the various tribes were kept remote from each other as much by deep-rooted mistrust of strangers and a belligerent attitude towards them as by the terrain in which they lived. Nevertheless, as European intruders were to find, the country presented formidable obstacles to its penetration.

Today, in a country united under a single flag, with most of the resources of modern technology available to it, the more colourful of these difficulties have been conquered. Even so, the terrain has not changed; nor has the climate Road building in different areas is carried out with difficulty, hampered by torrential rains, by gorges to be bridged, sheer cliffs to be surmounted, and vast tracts of swampland and looping snakelike rivers to be crossed.

These difficulties, combining with shortage of money for development, have prevented the establishment of a road system linking even all the main centres. Todaytwo main roads, narrow and rough, run from the capital, Port Moresby for less than 200 miles east and west. A long road links Lae, a town on the northeast coast with Wabag, the main centre in the Enga Province deep in the interior. Small roads run for miles from some smaller centres, along costal strips and wherever transport needs exist with a less difficult terrain.

Much of Papua New Guinea consists of the hundreds of islands around the mainland, cut off from other parts of the country by the sea. The difficult land surface and the distances over the sea mean that air transport, extremely expensive and sometimes dangerous, is the main means of transport of people over long distances, and of goods into most areas away from the coast.

Cultures and languages

Papua New Guinea is a country of many different peoples; even to an outsider the broad differences are apparent: the strong, stocky build of the highlander, the small stature of the Trobriand Islander; the black skinned Bougainvillean; the tight curly hair of the man from the Papuan area and the straight hair of some of the coastal people of Hula.

The different geographical enviornments in which people live have caused differences in their cultures. This canclearly be seen in the food people eat and the houses they live in: the people at the Western end of the Gulf of Papua living among the swamp lands, at the mouths of great rivers have little land suitable for agriculture so they catch fish and manufacture sago from the palms found in the swamp lands, and their houses stand on stilts above the mud of the riverbanks. The people of the Eastern Highlands grow sweet potato as a staple crop and live in round, windowless houses, built low on the ground for warmth at night and enclosing a hearth for cooking and for heat.

Kept apart through hostility, fear, and the enviornment, the different peoples have developed separate languages, rituals, and ways of life. These differences have increased the mutual suspicion of neighbouring groups, and their ignorance of even the existence of many distant tribes.

The number of languages in Papua New Guinea is estimated to be about 700. The problems of communication between people is immediately obvious, and is not to be solved simply by road building. Today Pidgin English has become the most important lingua francae in the country, a modern form of the pidgin spoken by the native people and their European masters in the early yeats of white settlement. Even Pidgin, however, s not universally spoken, while English, the language of the education system and of officialdom, is very limited in its use, being understood by a small percentage of the population, and losing in favour of vernaculars or lingua francae in conversation between many modern Papua New Guineans.

National Identity

In ancient times (which in Papua New Guinea might mean anything as recent as 50 to 100 years ago) the people of my country knew themselves to be members of a small unit: the village or group ofvillages with a common language. They had no awareness of themselves as members of a larger community with common origins and many cultural similarities. The partition of the land by European powers, Germany and Britain, in the 19th century, did little to change this consciousness. During the 20th century, however, and especially under the separate administrations both controlled from Australia, of New Guinea (formerely German New Guinea) and Papua (formerely British New Guinea) many people began to regard themselves as New Guineans or Papuans while retaining their village identity.

Today most Papua New Guineans still live in their ancestral villages, and retain their strongest sense of identity as a member of that group. At the same time, many are aware of their membership in the larger regionalor provincial groups, such as "highlands","Central Province","Sepiks", "Tolais" to name a few. Further, after many decades of Australian administration, many regard themselves as"Papuans" or "New Guineans", despite the formal political unity of today's independent nation. Our long name, Papua New Guinea, is itself a compromise, neither group wishing to lose its old title for the sake of a simpler, unified national name.

The national government, despite its wide publicity and much talk of "national unity" has succeded very little in promoting any sense of shared origins or destinies amongst its people. The old jealousies and suspicions remain, and quickly show themselves when triggered off by sporting competitions, disputes over land, or domentic quarrels. In this year alone, enormous damage to houses and food gardens have been done by warring groups, still using spears and stones, as well as some more modern improvised weapons, in several parts of the country.

The establishment of provincial governments across the country, in an attempt to decentralize decision making and government function, has not helped to develop a sense of national unity. It has only increased the bureaucracies involved in planning and implementing development.

Society and education

The establishment of Christian missions in various coastal spots during the last century saw the beginnings of formal, Western style education for the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea. Missionaries began to write down the languages of the people amongst whom they worked, and the foundations of literacy were laid. More remote parts of the interior has to wair many years for similiar developments. Today many rural areas have no school; some children walk for days to reach the nearest school, and many languages as yet have no written form.

All this has led to an unequal development of, amongst other things, education and literacy. Around the major towns, especially, education of this kind has been available to many people for 100years. In much of Papua New Guinea however, a few members of the present generation only have attended school. In no part of Papua New Guinea is even primary schooling universal. The majority of the people are still illiterate. Reading is still an uncultivated skill in Papua New Guinea, even amongst the most highly education section of the community.

Economic development has of course been concentrated in certain more accessible areas and longer established centres than in the remoter and less promising parts, and this fact has of course influenced the speed of social and economic change.

It will be apparent from the problems facing Papua New Guinea today, the obstacles found in the terrain, the inadequate road systems, the cultural and linguistic diversity, the unequal social and educational development of its people, that the establishment of a nationwide library service, even at the primary school level, and the spread of information relevant to the people's way of life and helpful in a time of urgent change, is an enormous task. To speak of extending services where almost none exist would be to ignore the realities.

THE REALITIES

Literacy learning and vernacular language

The Christian missions, the first modern educators in Papua New Guinea, have encouraged literacy in various vernaculars and lingua francae since the last years of the 19th century. Since the Second World War, however, the Australian government and the Papua New Guinea government have insisted on English as the only medium of instruction in schools and therefore of literacy amognst children. In recent years many educators have recognised the immense value of learning to read and write in ones mother tongue. So far this realisation has had no practical effect on educational policy in Papua New Guinea.

Today no child learns first to read and write in his mother tongue, instead his first steps in this difficult area of learning must be made through the English language. He begins to learn to read and write English when he is 7 years old, during the same year as he begins to speak it. And so he meets a double difficulty.

Learning through English

Until the 1970's many primary school teachers were Australians, native English speakers. To help them, they had teaching materials specially designed to fit the primary school syllabus and based upon widely accepted modern methods of language teaching. Since national independence in 1975, a new curriculum for primary schools has been introduced. In many subjects including English language no teaching materials have yet been provided. All our primary school teachers are Papua New Guineans. Many of them have had little education and professional training themselves and their teaching skills are not highly developed. They must begin the child's learning of the English language, a language which they to not handle well, with nothing to help them

but their own inadequate resources. The lack of teaching materials for English, is disastrous to the development of the children's literacy skills. Coming from non-literate households, learning to read for the first time in a foreign language and during the early stages of learning that language, taught by teachers whose own language use and reading skills are weak, children inevitably find the struggle difficult.

School populations

Not all school age children go to school. The schools can only provide a certain number of places for the many who want to receive education. After completing grade 6 only a selected few go on to secondary education. The elimination of many students is also done after grades 8 and 10 at secondary school, when many more students are barred from any chance of further schooling.

Today, these children, whose education ended so suddenly, flock to towns seeking work but usually find themselves with nothing fruitful to do. Only a small number of children, then, have access to (basic literacy learning), and even fewer develop literacy skills to a useful level.

Adult literacy

The only active adult literacy programme on any major scale is carried out by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. There is no government agency or organization that is involved with this issue and the various government bodies have no policy to promote adult literacy. There are other non-governmental organizations involved in helping the rural communities to read and write; but these are mainly mission organizations and of course have a religious bias. The adult population of Papua New Guinea is completely denied their right to read and write.

Although the provincial governments have on numerous occasions complained bitterly of communication breakdown with the village communities, there has been no plan forthcoming to do any thing about it. The adult population do not have any means of being informed of the activities of the governments. The only time most village people hear of changes in government, plans and policies is when the government officials visit them, or if they have access to a radio, through the provincial radio stations which relay news and other issues in the local languages,

The school library today

Primary schools are scattered throughout the country. They are now officially named "community schools". There is a marked uneveness of development within them. Those that were established at the time when Australia was pouring in large sums of aid-money enjoy the permanency of their buildings and other facilities. Today, with the scarce resources available to satisfy all the many needs of this new nation, the schools that are being built are of local non-permanenet materials.

Today, (according to the 1979 World Bank report) there are 3,000 primary schools spread across the country, and found in even the remotest areas. While they are not yet sufficient in number, they represent a resource which is not fully utilized.

Of the few that have been built this year, some have to make do under the shade of trees. Others use village dwelling houses. So, often these locally built bush materials buildings are found to be very ade-uate for storing anything. Given the many varities of the primary school set up, it is understandable that the October 1979 2nd Education Development Project-Loans re-uest to the World Bank on school libraries in Papua New Guinea gives the following statistics:

a) only 30 community schools out of 3,000 (1979) have a library room. Even these "libraries" are not sufficiently supplied with books to enable them to have much educational effect.

b) about 30 percent of the rest have classroom libraries which need to be enriched, having a tiny stock of suitable reading materials.

c) almost 70 percent have no school libraries or classroom libraries

These facts show that the primary school libraries even if they are to serve only the school children, in most cases need, not extending, but initial establishment.

Secondary schools are somewhat less depressing. Almost all of them have a library of some description. Some by chance have on their staff a teacher with some basic library training. But often, the English department usually takes charge. These schools however are not as well scattered as the primary schools, as most of them are placed close to main towns. They are therefore unable to extend their services to communities other than the ones within easy reach.

There is some concern form non-government organizations, mainly Christian missions as well as from many sectors of the community about the poor state of the school library service. These bodies together with the National Library School Service supply some reading materials, mainly for high schools. Primary schools are left very much on their own resources, but much of what they have today is donated and therefore unsuitable.

This year, the Papua New Guinea University of Technology has secured the interests of an non-profit making organization--Asia Foundation-- to supply books, free of charge, to Papua New Guinea schools as it has done in many Asian countries. So far the scheme has already supplied over 2,000 books to many schools and institutions that are within easy reach. There are schools outside our immediate scope who have heard about this scheme and have written to be included, but getting books to these will be a major obstacle because of their inaccessibility.

Although the scheme will be supplying books to many schools, there is doubt about their relevance and suitability to many junior readers. However, at least there is reading material for those who want to read for pleasure. But these books will only be useful to the educated English speaking minority.

Today the rural sector of the community cannot use our information services because much of it is in a foreign language. Therefore a literacy programme to combat the lack of information in the rural community must be set up immediately.

3.6 SUMMARY

To summarize my view of the present realities affecting the development of school libraries and other means of keeping people informed through the medium of print, I would say this: the primary schools which by their number are a promising source of community education at all levels are a wasted resource. As educators of children they are second rate, held back by a lack of supportive material for the teacher; as instructors in reading and writing they are inefficient, hampered by the medium of a foreign language; and as potentially vital centres of community education they are totally neglected.

4. SOME PROPOSALS

4.1 Increase efficiency in primary schools

The most notable of the many problems facing the primary school today is the inefficiency of the teachers. The teachers are greatly handicapped by a lack of appropriate teaching materials, even more so when their educational and professional training are considered. Their problems increase as one looks further and finds that a foreign medium is used to communicate with the pupils, a language which a great majority have not mastered at all. Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that many leaders today question the deteriorating standards in education.

Port Moresby Teacher Inservice Training College has recently begun a much needed inservice course but only time will tell of its value to teachers.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics should seriously be asked to help the primary school teacher to produce instructional materials. This Institute was awarded the 1979 International Reading Association Literacy Award for their work in Papua New Guinea. The members of this Institute have had years of experience in literacy teaching therefore have developed teaching skills which can be of great value to many teachers

4.2 Adult literacy through the primary school

Teaching literacy in the mother tongue is not new. It was first introduced 50-60 years ago by the various mission bodies to get their messages across. They were of course very successful in learning the languages. Once the communication process was established they began producing books of the New Testament and other reading and writing booklets to get the people to read and write. Many of todays leaders are products of the pioneering mission days. This tradition is still very active in many parts of the country. Most notable of these mission bodies is the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which is actively engaged in excellent projects in teaching a lot of the newly contacted communities to read and write as well as teaching them simple home cooking and carpentry, and many other simple domestic skills.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics is involved in training the Papua New Guineans to develop their skills in printing, typing, or whatever work they engage in. They are all encouraged to upgrade or improve their educational standards. Villagers are trained to read and write and in various other technologies appropriate to the village. These people later go back to their various villages and pass on what they have learnt.

Members of this Institute go and live in villages and learn not only their languages but the whole complex structure of their societies. I have often heard village people referring to these workers as "One of us" which is a bery rare comment indeed. Everything is geared towards the village level.

From the Directors' Annual Report of 1979, the Summer Institute of Linguistics has helped with the training of teachers from two provinces in a two-month long course at Ukarumpa (the name of their centre in the R.H.P.) These teachers are planning to conduct preschool programs in the vernacular of the province. They have produced primers and reading materials in their own languages as well as planning curricula and preparing other course materials. Throughout 1979, the members of the Institute studies well over a hundred Papua New Guinea languages.

The country obviously has got a great potential. All that needs to happen is to intergrate the Institutes' Adult Literacy programme with the community schools. Once this happens then the in-service training programmes can get underway and the members of the Summer Institue of Linguistics will in no time teach the community teachers. This will allow them to produce materials to begin the adult literacy programme in their vernacular.

All this of course will need the support of both the National and Provincial Governments.

4.3 The primary school as an information resource centre

The primary school is found across the country, even in the most remote parts. Because of this excellent link, the development of them to act as centres of information or resource centres for the surrounding hamlets must begin with them.

With assistence from the Summer Institute of Linguistics, financial and manpower support from the National and Provincial Governments, the Education Department, the Universities and the Administrative Colleges, the National Literacy Programme could be set up. This will mean involving all bodies enganged in information and extension work will be incorporated and carefully coordinated to producematerials for the project. These could range from instructional materials to teach people the skill of reading. They must be in the vernacular to develop fluency. They could be simple translations of short stories from other countries to help educate the people beyond the family, community and Papua New Guinea horizons. Materials in the mother tongue will no doubt make reading for Papua New Guineans a more meaningful experience.

Once all these materials are produced, they can be tested for suitability. The sorting of these suitable materials will produce a "Reading Pack", which will be in parcels of materials carefully selected (for language level and relevance of content) and distributed to all primary schools for distribution to the surrounding hamlets.

The resource centre materials could range from a little stationary store to radios, tape recorders, batteries, gas lamps, wall charts, books, stools, chairs, mats, etc. All materials produced by various organizations should all be found in this centre such as family planning leaflets, agricultural instructional sheets and health department charts. In this way the resource centre can in time be a place where people can go and gather information about anything.

The village pastor should be asked to distribute these materials to the individual families. A record of the people who have these should be kept. There must be some to be kept permanently for prople to practice the skill of reading but most should be returned to build up the stock of the resource centre. These resource centres will have a variety of materials since many different departments will be involved in producing them.

There will of course be hamlets without lights to read by at night, so the pastor who would usually have a light and a church building should with the help of those already able to read and write provide these facilities to conduct reading classes. Some huts also will have problems of keeping these materials clean, so the pastor could also keep these since he would most certainly have a modernised house.

It is most important that these projects should involve the missions. The missions in most parts of Papua New Guinea have carried out very successful developmental projects because of the majority of their members are dedicated and are genuine in seeking the well-being of the local people. I am well aware of some mission groups causing confusion among the people and the governments are making moves to get those out. The missions like the primary schools are everywhere and often the teachers and pastors form very good relationships and work together to the betterment of the village communities.

4.4 SUMMARY

Today the primary schools in Papua New Guinea are officially named "community" schools to reflect the government's wish for them to assist children in a deeper awareness of themselves as members of their community. This title would gain even more meaning if these schools reached out to serve their communities in other ways:

a) To become more efficient in teaching literacy to children

b) To provide the means of teaching literacy to adults

c) To provide a community service as information resource centres

These changes, especially the last two, would have to begin on a small scale, with limited achievable aims. Once developed, they should retain their place as essential community services, maintained by the community with assistance from the various government agencies.

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